

Former DHS Star to Compete at Olympic Trials



With the early exit of the Bruins and Celtics from this year's play-offs and the hopes of Red Sox fans being dashed by early-season failures, local sports fans are searching for something to cheer about.

The arrival of the '96 Summer Olympics in Atlanta will be perfectly timed and with it comes the potential for a great story with local interest.

While Duxbury is the home to pro basketball and hockey players, never has it had the chance to boast that a present or former resident might represent the U.S. in track and field at the Olympics.

Former DHS track and cross-country star Andy Downin, whose family moved to Hampstead, NH after his graduation in '91, is currently on a list of 36 invitees to compete for one of 3 positions available on the 1500 Meter Olympic track team.

The former Boston Globe "Runner of The Year" and 6-time All-American at Georgetown University in cross-country and indoor track will be competing in the Olympic Trials starting on June 14 in Atlanta to pick the final squad.

Andy currently holds the second-fastest 1500 meter time of any American collegiate runner in the U.S. and the seventh fastest time in the NCAA this year.

His time of 3:40.8 makes him a provisional qualifier for the trials as automatic qualification requires a time of 3:39.9. It appears at this point in the process that Andy's time will not be beaten by enough runners to eliminate him from contention.

While the Olympic trials are foremost on Andy's mind, another major competition looms on the horizon shortly.

Andy left over the Memorial Day weekend for the NCAA National Outdoor Track Championships to be held in Eugene, OR from May 29 through June 2. It is there that he'll face the premier runners in college track; Ugandan Julius Achon from George Mason University who is the current NCAA indoor mile champ and a world junior champion and Marco Koers from Illinois.

"Achen usually kicks my butt," said Andy. "He's a world class runner and the NCAAAs are really minor league stuff for him."

While the competition from other universities has been intense over the years, rarely will you find a program that can supply the internal competition that Georgetown has supplied for Andy.

His 2 roommates, Eric O'Brien and Mark Sivieri, have also been chosen for the trials which presents a unique situation according to O'Brien.

"There is really no pressure on us," said O'Brien, who hails from Atlanta. "We're running real well right now and may be peaking at the right time. You don't get many opportunities like this so we don't want to set any limits as to how we might do."

Andy agrees with Eric and does not treat lightly the fact that teammate's support can come in very handy during the trials.

"A lot of the runners we'll be facing are professionals," said Downin. "They don't get a lot of support and are usually out there on their own. Having teammates around gives you support which you sometimes need because of the way the pros tend to look down on you. They view us as inferior because we don't have the big corporate sponsors to back us. But I really feel that they're the ones who are scared because they have no real idea who we are and what to expect."

Andy and his roommates have had a chance to train with many of America's top runners in a group called the Reebok Enclave based in Washington, DC. The Enclave boast the country's top miler in Steve Holman who is also ranked #4 in the world.

"One of the things you've got to understand about these trials is that some of the runners did their qualifying times almost a year ago and may not be at their top performance level right now," said Sue Downin, Andy's mom.

"That's why you can't rule out anything, especially with the way his confidence level has risen since the IC4A Championships at Harvard this winter and the IC4As at George Mason this spring when he was part of the record-breaking 4 x 800 relay team."

"I'm in the best mile-shape of my career," said Downin. "When I first picked Georgetown for its combination of track and academics, I never really felt that reaching this level was the ultimate goal. But as I moved up each step the dream kept getting closer. Now I can taste it."

Although Andy's physical condition is at its peak, does the pressure get to him mentally?

"A lot of track is mental," he says. "And it's not a positive mental. You have to keep eliminating negative thoughts and keep telling yourself you can do it. A lot of guys at the trials will be happy just to say they made it there."

"If you came to me at the beginning of the season I would have told you my goal was to make it to the Olympic Trials. My whole attitude since then has been to take things day-to-day. But this season has moved along so quickly and my confidence level has risen so steadily that I don't want to set any limits as to what I might do."

In order for the field to be whittled down from 36 to 24, the top 4 finishers in each grouping of 12 runners will be selected, along with the next best 12 times.

"These trials will be better than any meet I've been in," Downin stated. "It will take a better effort than my current best time just to get into the final group."

And if he doesn't make it?

"When I go into meets with the attitude that I'm just going to have fun, I usually do my best. There's no real pressure here for me, so big things might happen."

Downin is scheduled to run in a preliminary heat on Monday, June 17 at approximately 6:40 pm, and if he advances, he would run again on Friday, June 21. The finals are scheduled for Sunday, June 23.

Dean Diltz, a publicist for ESPN, said that highlights of Downin's preliminary race, being run in the Olympic Stadium in Atlanta, should be aired that night on ESPN between 7:30 and 10:30.

Semi-final highlights will be broadcast the night of June 21 and the finals will be broadcast live on NBC.